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THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF TRAVEL AGENTS (ASTA)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of ASTA in the leisure industry.

THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF TRAVEL AGENTS (ASTA)

The American Society of Travel agents (ASTA) is the world's largest travel and tourism organization. More than 20,000 organizations and individuals from over 127 countries are dues paying members of the organization. While the largest category of membership represents retail travel agencies, virtually all segments of the travel industry choose to belong to this vast organization.

The active, or voting, category of membership is restricted to retail travel agencies who are appointed for the sale of airline tickets. More than 10,000 travel agency locations are represented in ASTA. Allied membership represents the second largest category in the organization. Airlines, hotels, cruise lines, tour operators, insurance companies, credit card companies, government tourist offices and educational institutions are included in the Allied category. Any non-travel agency organization with interest in travel and tourism is eligible for allied membership.

The International Division represents the third largest category of membership. International members are primarily receptive service operators located throughout the world. The main interest of the international member is a positive business relationship with retail travel agencies throughout the United States and Canada.

ASTA is governed by a Board of Directors consisting of four officers elected by the U.S. Active membership every two years, and immediate past president and sixteen National Directors, each elected by an area of membership within the United States. For the purpose of activities and communications, the U.S. membership of ASTA is divided into 27 geographic chapters. Each chapter elects its own officers. The international division also elects governors for regions of the world and includes a chapter structure by country or region.

ASTA policy is developed and approved by the Board of Directors assisted by National Committees for a variety of subject matter areas (i.e. Aviation, Automation, Consumer Affairs, Education and Training). A Paid professional staff of 75 headed by a paid President serves the organization at its Washington, D.C. headquarters. A western regional office with a staff of four is maintained in San Diego, California.

ASTA is a travel industry trade association with a two-fold purpose. First, ASTA exists to perform services for its members which can not be performed effectively on an individual basis. These services include representing the travel agency industry in government affairs--relations primarily with the Civil Aeronautics Board, Congress and other government organizations. ASTA also acts as spokesperson for the travel agency industry in dealing with travel supplier organizations such as the Air Traffic Conference, the Cruise Line International Association and other industry groups.

ASTA maintains a strong Consumer Affairs Department to handle consumer complaints as well as complaints initiated by travel agencies and other members. The Consumer Affairs function seeks to solve problems short of legal action.

ASTA's second primary function is to help its membership become more effective in the market place and improve profitability. ASTA maintains an Education and Training Department which is responsible for an extensive series of workshops and seminars designed to help the membership improve marketing and management functions. In addition, ASTA Marketing Services, Inc. provides a variety of services and supplies to the membership at lower than general market costs.

The majority of ASTA's membership, the travel agents, serve as the primary distribution system for many travel and tourism services. Most of the organizations in three of the four basic components of tourism--transportation, accommodations and attractions--participate at least in name in ASTA activities. Only food service has limited representation--generally by organizations which are also involved in other functions. As local recreation activities develop a second market--the traveling visitor--ASTA will increase its degree of contact and cooperation.

With the growth of deregulation in the travel industry, consumer confusion is rampant. It has become harder and harder for the traveler to determine if he or she is getting the best value for the dollar--especially with respect to air tickets, hotel, and car rentals. Professional travel agents believe that the educated consumer is the best customer. Because the profitability of the travel agency is dependent upon repeat and referral business, professional travel agents pattern their marketing practices to meet client needs. ASTA believes that the professional, profitable travel agency helps the consumer secure the best travel for the dollar. The growth of tourism is based upon positive traveler experiences. ASTA believes that the professional travel agent plays an important role in assuring positive traveler experiences. ASTA believes that it is helping the travel agent become more professional and profitable and therefore, contributing to positive travel experiences and the betterment of tourism in the future.